

Dispelling the Myths

After sharing their beliefs about sexual harassment, participants examine which beliefs are true and which are really myths.

Goals

- To discover the beliefs participants hold about sexual harassment.
- To examine the impact of these beliefs on behavior.
- To dispel the myths connected with sexual harassment.

Group Size

Up to 25 participants

Time

1-1/2 hours

Materials

White board and markers or easel and pad; masking tape; **Sexual Harassment Beliefs** worksheets

Process

☞ *Prior to the exercise, prepare and hang belief sheets on the walls. Each sheet should include one of the statements from the **Sexual Harassment Beliefs** worksheets, but not the truth behind the myth [bracketed information]. Make two columns below each statement, one labelled "Men" and the other "Women."*

1. Introduce the exercise with the following chaltalk:
 - a. In this session you will have an opportunity to explore gender beliefs about sexual harassment as well as your own personal thoughts.
 - b. We are going to start with an exercise that you should find thought provoking.
 - c. As we conduct the exercise, keep in mind that you will get the most out of it if you are open and honest.
2. Present the following instructions for the exercise
 - a. The sheets hanging around the room contain various beliefs about men and women, especially issues that relate to sexual harassment.
 - b. Take a magic marker, go to each sheet, and make a check mark under your gender only if you believe the statement.
 - c. Make an "X:" under your gender only if you do not believe the statement but feel your gender in general believes it.
 - d. Do not talk while you are doing this – we will have an opportunity to discuss each statement later.

- e. After you have gone to each sheet, take a brief break until I call everyone back. Do not wander far away.
3. Distribute the magic markers and tell them to start.
4. When all have finished, reconvene the group and present the following chaltalk:
 - a. Women and men often see the same behavior very differently.
 - b. Attitudes about behavior stem from the socialization messages we received growing up and, in some cases, still receive today.
 - c. Part of what we learned is misinformation about gender attitudes and behavior.
 - d. We will now examine the work we just did and explore which of the beliefs are actually myths many women and men believe are true.
5. Form groups of 5 participants, give each group a roughly-equal number of belief sheets from the wall, and provide the following instructions:
 - a. Decide whether each statement is a fact or a myth.
 - b. If you think the belief is really a myth, record what you think the real fact is on the sheet.
 - c. Count the check marks and Xs and discuss what they indicate and imply for the workplace.
 - d. Take about 20 minutes for the discussion and be prepared to report the results of your work.
- ☞ *Move from group to group to see how each is proceeding and help those that need it.*
6. After all have finished, reconvene the entire group and have each group report their work using the following process:
 - a. Select one group to begin and have them share the results of their discussion of their first belief sheet.
 - b. Ask the rest of the group whether they agree that the statement is a myth or is true.
 - c. Share the truth behind the myth by reading the corresponding bracketed information from the Sexual Harassment Beliefs worksheets.
 - d. Have the entire group briefly discuss the impact of this belief on the behavior of women and men in the workplace and how they could change the myth and replace it with more realistic information.
 - e. Move on to the group's next sheet and repeat the process until each group has reported their work on all of their worksheets.
7. Conclude by distributing copies of the **Sexual Harassment Beliefs** worksheets and encouraging participants to counteract these myths whenever they encounter them in the workplace.

Variations

Develop your own belief sheets tailored to specific groups.

Sexual Harassment Beliefs

If a woman is friendly and smiles at a man it is an indication that she wants to have sex with him.

[Myth. In a recent study, males thought females were more sexually attracted to them than the women reported. Women have been socialized to smile even when angry.]

Women are “asking for it” when they wear provocative clothing.

[Myth. Organizations should have professional dress codes appropriate to the job. However, a woman’s appearance usually has more to do with her interpretation of fashion than seduction on the job, and it does not give license to break the law. Some organizations also require women to dress in a sexually provocative way (waitresses, etc.)]

Women appreciate comments about their appearance at work and view them as compliments.

[Myth. Most women want comments at work to be about their work, not about how they look. Many of the comments women get are not “You look nice today,” but “You should wear that outfit more often, it shows off your great figure.” Even a so-called mundane comment is often accompanied by “elevator eyes” or leers with sexual overtones. It may be true that many women do not mind the occasional nonsexual comment about their appearance, but if that is the only feedback they receive, they may feel that they are perceived as sex objects.]

Most charges of sexual harassment are false; women lie about sexual harassment to get back at men.

[Myth. False reports are rare and most sexually-harassed women do not report it or tell anyone about it. In reality, women have little to gain from filing sexual harassment charges and a lot to lose.]

A woman who takes a man’s job deserves whatever treatment she gets.

[Myth. There is no longer male entitlement to certain jobs. Men should be used to competing with women professionally and not use power or intimidation to punish women who work in what used to be considered male jobs.]

A woman could discourage unwanted sexual attention if she really wanted it to stop.

[Myth. This belief is a way for men to rationalize their behavior. At times people can stop sexual harassment by saying it is unwelcome and telling the perpetrator to stop. However, in some situations the behavior continues no matter what the woman does. And women fear their careers will be in jeopardy if they speak up.]

Sexual harassment is simply a crude form of socializing common only to certain segments of the population.

[Myth. Sexual harassment is found in all types of work settings and is committed by doctors, professors, and managers as well as those with blue collar jobs, such as construction workers, fire fighters, etc.]

Incompetent workers who fear losing their jobs file sexual harassment claims to protect themselves.

[Myth. Often women keep quiet when in training or on probation at work, but when they fail the training they feel they have nothing to lose by reporting the harassment they received. The harassment can also impact work performance, which is perhaps the perpetrator's intent – to get the woman out of the workplace.]

Sexual harassment must not have happened because the so-called victim didn't complain at the time.

[Myth. Most women do not talk about the problem to anyone; they instead try to block it out or grin and bear it.]

A certain amount of male control or domination and sexism is normal and acceptable.

[Myth. While this behavior is common, it is not acceptable. Until women and men stop believing this, the workplace will not change.]

Sexual harassment affects only a few women.

[Myth. As evidenced by the current stories in the media and by studies reporting various figures that demonstrate that more than half the women who work outside the home say they have been sexually harassed in the workplace at some time during their career.]

Men can't control urges or behavior – "boys will be boys."

[Myth. Men need to take responsibility for their own behavior. Sexual harassment has more to do with power than sex.]

If a person ignores sexual harassment, it will go away.

[Myth. In reality the harassment often persists and intensifies. Ignoring it may be seen as assent or encouragement.]

Successful women have "slept their way to the top."

[Myth. Although it could happen with either men or women, this behavior most often leads to women being fired or gossiped about, not promoted. This statement is sometimes made to insult someone and avoid acknowledging hard work and skills.]

Women should take care of men and protect their fragile egos.

[Myth. Many women believe this and feel women should not complain about sexual harassment, which would hurt the man or his career. However, everyone is responsible for their own self-esteem.]

Sexual harassment happens only to promiscuous women.

[Myth. Women of all personality types, include “nice,” can be victims of harassment. This belief also reinforces the myth that only promiscuous and willing women are harassed.]

Nice women don’t get harassed.

[Myth. Again, women of all personality types, including “nice,” can be victims of harassment. This belief also reinforces the myth that only promiscuous and willing women are harassed.]

Only uptight and maladjusted women with sexual and social hang-ups claim to have been harassed.

[Myths. Once again, all types of women are harassed.]

“No” means “yes.”

[Myth. Both women and men believe this message. People must take “no” as “no” in the workplace. Women need to say no emphatically and directly; often they soften a “no” to avoid hurting a man’s feelings.]